

Public Notice

REACHING THE CUSTOMER

Presentation Is Everything BY KAREN FRIEDMAN

Have you ever spoken to a group of people, only to get a blank stare? Is it your subject, or is it you? Whether presenting one-on-one or to a group, many speakers drone on and on, unaware that people are tuning them out. Their audiences blame style, delivery, and organization.

Although these criticisms may be valid, it takes far more to keep your audience's attention in today's fast-paced world, and water utility professionals are realizing that expert knowledge is no longer enough—they need to hone their speaking skills to succeed. "I work with a lot of terrific people who are exceptional at what they do," says one senior manager. "But in order for them to take their careers to the next level, senior management needs to see them as leaders who can command attention and respect."

HELPFUL HINTS

The ability to present key information clearly and concisely is critical to a person's credibility as well as to the respect he or she earns, both internally and externally. But even top-tier managers will privately admit they aren't sure how to deliver more effective data-packed presentations that contain fewer slides and more personality. They acknowledge that their PowerPoint-driven presentations are too long, lack organization, substance, style, and sometimes fail to provide perspective, context, or direction. Sheepishly and slightly embarrassed, they divulge that this is the way it's always been done, and they're afraid to leave out important information or personalize their presentations for fear of not being taken seriously.

Regardless of how well you craft your message, you will be hard-pressed to connect with higher ups or the public if you don't learn how to appeal to their emotions. Even though your subject matter may be complicated and technical, you must put the content in context to make it relevant to the listener. By combining facts with emotional appeal, you will have a

better chance of influencing perceptions and communicating your way to the top.

Get Out of Your Own Way: You know your business, which is why you're speaking. So stop trying to jam 10 lb of information into a 2-lb bag just to prove you know your stuff. Figure out how the facts and information bring relevance and value to your audience. If you're talking technology, how will the technology save your audience time and money? How will your work today improve someone's quality of life in the future? Step out of your shoes and into theirs to address audience concerns.

Drowning in Data: People remember impressions, not drifts of data. They remember how you made them feel. When we see stories about summer hurricanes, we don't remember all of the facts. But we'll never forget the stories, the images, and how we felt when we saw almost indescribable pictures of death and devas-

tation. Make your facts and figures stronger by supporting them with real evidence such as powerful numbers, examples, anecdotes, and visual images that leave a lasting impression.

Stump the Chump: It's almost inevitable that managers will interrupt your presentation to ask questions. As distressing as this can be, they aren't trying to stump you. Think of the questions as opportunities to address management's concerns; use them as stepping stones to repeat and reinforce key points or deliver additional information. It's helpful to anticipate questions and prepare answers in advance.

Remember the Three Cs: Delivering information and presenting the numbers isn't enough. You must be clear, concise, and credible. You must quickly articulate how the utility will save money, what you're doing to address problems, anticipated hurdles, and how your strategy will drive future benefits.

No One Came to See a Slide Show: Today's business presenters often equate preparation to preparing a slide presentation. Visuals should reinforce what you say, not



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serve as your script. Don't read the slide! Audiences are looking to you to make sense of information. Prepare your presentation first. Then develop visuals that support your key messages. Additionally, write in bullets or phrases to help you talk more and read less so you're free to look at people and engage them.

Pet Peeves: Audiences are a bit like television reporters. They want you to get to the point—quickly. When people ask a question, they want the facts, not long-winded answers. If they interrupt you in the middle of a slide to ask a question, they want you to answer the question and then move on instead of answering the question and repeating all of the information on the slide. Often, presenters over-answer questions to buy time, fill

the silence, or because they think a brief response is too simplistic. "Less is more" still holds true. Long answers frequently dilute messages, lack examples, and open the door for unwanted questions.

Don't Dull It Down: Step away from your expertise to put the information in perspective. Instead of tackling tactics and strategies first, start by presenting the significance of the problem so the audience understands why the solution is so important.

Voice Vision with Volume: When you speak, you're on! Even if it's a small meeting, you want to project so your voice is strong and authoritative. Many people are soft spoken and others start out strong but trail off at the end of a sentence. Try visualizing a person in the back of the room

straining to hear you. Speak to that person to better project. And, whenever possible, stand up to maximize the richness of your voice.

LEARN BY EXAMPLE

If you stop and think about it, you can probably recall a couple of memorable presentations. What is it you remember? What did they have in common? Chances are the presenters were personable and energetic. They were able to quickly cut to the chase and repeatedly reinforce their key points. And, while they likely rehearsed their well-thought-out, organized, pre-planned, and prepared remarks over and over again, they probably made you feel as if they were simply speaking off the cuff for your benefit.



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